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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTION OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Written statement* submitted by the International Federation of Journalists, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[2 February 2000]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, as received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Introduction

The 21st Century is dawning upon an emerging global society. In the context of dramatic and rapid changes in the use of information technology we are witnessing the phenomenal growth of international civil society. Alongside the globalisation of markets and capital we see increased respect for democratic principles, and greater recognition of fundamental human rights. Above all, this new world-wide landscape is giving strength to the essential notion that the abuse of human rights in one part of the world is felt by us all, in every other part of international society. The expression of this emerging global norm cannot be seen better than here, at the Fifty-Sixth Session of the Commission on Human Rights. Yet, in spite of the clear signs of progress movement towards a truly democratic global community continues to be impeded by authoritarianism, repression, and the denial of rights and freedoms of the majority by a few who cling to power through coercion, and the control of information.

We in the world of journalism recognise only too well the importance of the free flow of accurate, reliable and useful information in the creation of democracy and the defence of human rights. We applaud the commitment of the United Nations family to the cause of journalistic freedom.

As Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General, stated on June 2, 1999: *"Press freedom is a cornerstone of human rights. It holds governments responsible for their acts, and serves a warning to all that impunity is an illusion."*

We could not agree more. The right to receive and impart information is a fundamental human right, as reliable information is the basis upon which democracy, openness, and accountability are founded.

Impeding the free flow of information for political or commercial interests promotes ignorance and uncertainty and, at worse, creates fear in the minds of people. It is in this context that we address you on the harrowing conditions in which many journalists and people who work with them continue to work.

Violations of the rights of journalists are, we believe, actions that threaten all of democratic society. Violence against independent media and censorship continue to flourish in some corners of the world.

But some of the threats to independent journalism come today from more subtle sources. The concentration of power in the economic fabric of journalism threatens pluralism and media quality.

Governments and powerful economic interests cannot, and must not, either directly or indirectly, silence or manipulate media to suit their own interests. The international community at large must denounce and remove all obstacles to freedom of expression. This is not just an expression of journalistic self-interest, although we in the IFJ do speak strongly in defence of our members, but unless we all act together to remove the real and present threats to press freedom everyone in democratic society stands to lose.

Murders

The most brutal silencing of information is through murder. In 1999, no less than 87 journalists and media workers were killed in the course of their work. Journalists increasingly are becoming targets of violence, brutality, and intimidation. In conflict situations, journalists are literally in the front line. We have seen some high profile examples of targeting of media in recent conflicts as in the case of NATO bombing of Radio and Television Serbia and Russian military attacks on media in Chechnya. At the same time, some governments have targeted individual journalists, as in the case of a leading editor brutally assassinated in Belgrade.

At the same time and far from the frontline of conflict, many journalists die at the hands of political groups or criminals or unknown assassins.

When a journalist is killed it is an attack against the entire population, not simply an individual. Whoever can silence the journalist can silence everyone. Unless the authorities make investigations of these killings a priority, there is little hope for the protection of basic human rights. Too often governments and civil authorities fail to make even cursory investigation of the killing of journalists. As a result some perpetrators of these murders believe the killing of a journalist will not have repercussions.

Today the IFJ calls on the United Nations Commission on Human Rights not just to condemn formally all murders of journalists and media workers, but to insist that governments give details of all journalists and media workers killed in their countries and that they report on the steps taken to apprehend the killers.

Impunity: A Lack of Accountability

The lack of accountability for human rights violations committed, or condoned, by agents of the state encourages those to resort to coercion to act with impunity. When agents of the state commit human rights abuses, they are not punished for their actions in many countries.

Sometimes killings of journalists are not regarded as a priority, and low-grade officers are assigned to the investigations. In other instances, vested interests ensure that investigations are slow and inefficient. Whatever the reason, there is a lack of commitment to prosecuting those responsible

A lack of accountability is a direct threat to the rule of law, which is the fundamental basis of a democratic society. Truth is essential for democratic life,

We call on the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to demand prompt, adequate, and effective investigations into all murders of journalists and media workers.

Access to Information

A central issue in creating the conditions for press freedom and unimpeded journalistic inquiry is the right to access to information for all citizens. This is, we believe, essential for democracy to flourish. Governments must ensure that public information is freely provided to journalists and citizens alike. However, in many countries, either no legislation exists to guarantee such access, or there is unwillingness on the part of the authorities to provide access to information. This creates an atmosphere of secrecy and uncertainty and contributes to the difficulties facing journalists.

Journalists from independent media sometimes face discrimination in receiving information from public authorities that tend to favour the government press. In other instances, journalists are required to pay a public official in order to obtain information that should be freely available. This is not a case of fees for administrative charges, but corruption where public servants will not provide the information unless they receive personal payment.

A more insidious consequence of a denial to provide access comes in those countries, which use defamation laws and the courts to imprison journalists who they accuse of rumour-mongering or spreading false information, yet these same governments will often refuse to provide basic information, they will deny access to press briefings to members of the independent media and they do not give interviews to independent journalists. Journalists are kept in the dark and then victimised when they try to shed light on the affairs of government that the authorities would prefer to keep hidden from public view.

The IFJ recommends that the United Nations Commission for Human Rights call on all State Parties to ensure that access to information is guaranteed in law and in practice and that penalties are imposed where such access is denied.

Conclusion

The international community need look no further than the last decade to recognise the fatal consequences of ignoring attacks on journalists and control of the media by governments and powerful interests groups.

During these years we have seen the apparent triumph of democratic values in many corners of the world. But during this time we have recorded the deaths of more than 760 journalists and media staff.

It is time we believe to call a halt to this slaughter. Without concerted action on the part of the international community, governments will continue to feel justified in actions to try to control information and to muzzle journalists. When they do this they contribute to instability and undermine development. The IFJ urges the UN Commission on Human Rights to reiterate the importance of freedom of expression and to defend the right of journalists to exercise their profession free from intimidation and fear.

In particular the IFJ calls on the UN Commission on Human Rights:

- To condemn formally all murders of journalists and media workers;
- To request that governments give details of all journalists and media workers killed in their countries and the steps taken to apprehend the killers;
- To demand prompt, adequate, and effective investigations into all murders of journalists and media workers;
- To call on all State Parties to ensure that access to information is guaranteed in law and in practice and that penalties are imposed where such access is denied.

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